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THE OAK OF HENRY IV. AT FONTAINEBLEAU.

HENRY IV., of France, the lucky prince who escaped the massacre of St. Bartholomew, when so many thousands became the victims of the savage revenge of Catherine—because they had not upheld her against the Guises—was almost the greatest patron the castle and wood of Fontainebleau ever had. Catherine and the ferocious Charles IX. had previously made it a scene of pleasure, and had here successfully cajoled some of the Huguenots, who were then making efforts, which, if successful, would have raised France to a pinnacle of extraordinary prosperity, and would effectually have prevented the subsequent revolution.

But things were ordained otherwise ; and Henry IV. was himself obliged to recant his religion ere he could secure the throne of his beloved France, of which he was, undoubtedly, one of the best kings.

In the manuscript department of the king's library of Paris is a letter, by which the monarch announces to the celebrated Gabrielle d'Estrees his arrival at Fontainebleau. It is very characteristic of the king, who, in some particular, rather resembled Henry VIII. of this country.

FROM OUR DELICIOUS DESERT OF FONTAINE-BELLE-EAU.

" My dear Friend,—The courier arrived this evening. I have sent him back at once, because he informs me that you have given him instructions to return immediately with news of me. I am very well, thank God. All I desire is to see you.—HENRY."

Gabrielle d'Estrees loved the king. She was determined, in her own mind, to be queen of France. There was easy morality in those days, but there was also inordinate ambition in many minds. That the beautiful Gabrielle should aspire to be the spouse of the king, who loved her, was not at all surprising ; but the task, with every good disposition on the part of the king towards her, was a difficult one.

There was a minister in France to whom the king was, with justice and reason, very much attached. He was a man who loved his country, and he was well aware that a king, who owed his throne to a successful revolution, would do much wiser to ally himself to some of the princesses of royal blood, than to any private individual.

Gabrielle knew that she had to contend with this powerful and firm opposition. But she did not despair. She played for a throne, and that was a prize worthy in her mind of every risk. She, therefore, on the receipt of the king's letter, came in all haste with other ladies to Fontainebleau.

She saw at once that Rosny de Sully was aware of her design and prepared to oppose it by every means in his power. He received her with great respect, and showed a degree of humility which was surprising.

But Gabrielle was not to be deceived. The next morning, as a party of ladies and courtiers were promenading in the beautiful park, she contrived to be alone with the king under the great oak-tree, of which we have given an engraving.

The king was as usual gallant, and spoke of her beauty and his affection in no measured terms.

" Your majesty is very good," said the beautiful favourite with much emotion ; " but, sire, do you remember a certain promise made at St. Germain, which —"

" What promise ?" asked the king.

" A promise, sire, which was to have been carried out there, but which a certain Rosny de Sully —"

" Do you speak of my friend and first adviser ?" said the king with a slight frown.

" Your friend, sire, I know ; but not mine," replied the lady. " He hates me ; but I return the compliment."

" Beautiful Gabrielle !" said the king, who loved a little mischief ; " I do not think Sully could hate a woman : he cares too little about them."

" Sire !" exclaimed Gabrielle d'Estrees, blushing with anger, " you mean that we women are beneath the notice of so great a man."

" I am afraid he is sufficiently ungallant to consider the heart of a woman not a very valuable commodity."

" Sire, it matters little what Rosny de Sully thinks, if the memory of Henry IV. of France be good. I remind your majesty once more, of your promise at St. Germain."

" Tut! tut! *ma mie*, what promise ?"

" You said, sire, that you loved me, and were sufficiently of a peasant—those were your majesty's words—to think that a good wife was a thing which a king should covet above everything."

" A good wife is an excellent thing," said Henry IV. gravely.

" Then your majesty recollects your promise at St. Germain ?" said the lady, whose eyes flashed fire. Ambition now overcame every other feeling.

" Faith, Gabrielle, and thou wouldst make a rare queen. Few would equal you, if any. None would surpass you in loveliness," continued the king, musing.

" When, then, will you announce it to the court ?" exclaimed Gabrielle, seizing the king's hand.

" Tut! tut !" said the king laughing ; " *ma mie* is in a hurry. Rosny de Sully is not a man to be gained over in a minute."

At this moment the grave minister appeared before them only a few yards distant. The king affectionately nodded to him, and the minister bowed profoundly.

" Your majesty recollects the interview at twelve ?" he said inquiringly.

" Ah ! yes," exclaimed the monarch rather uneasily, " about that eternal question of my marriage."

" Your majesty," said the grave minister, who saw the king was inclined to talk, " marriage, in crowned heads, is a duty they owe to society. As long as your majesty is without due heirs and successors, there will be fear of civil war."

" Sully, you mean well, but I fear marriage is too great a tie."

" Your majesty is too great a king, to consult your personal feelings. The good of your country will be your first thought."

" Rosny," said Henry IV., with a laugh ; " you usually con demn flatterers. Where have you been taking such apt lessons ?"

" I never flatter, sire. But, perhaps, this question of the marriage had better be reserved for the council-chamber."

" Why not speak of it now ?" exclaimed Gabrielle d'Estrees, with a fierce and angry look at Sully, her chief enemy, she well knew, as regarded the marriage question.

" Gabrielle is right, in truth. Under this oak-tree is pleasanter on such a day than in my cabinet. Seat yourself there, my trusty counsellor, on that wooden seat, and let us talk of affairs of state."

" The presence of a lady," said the minister gravely, " is somewhat against the usual custom of councils."

" Sully," replied the king, " you forget Jeanne d'Albret, her whose courage saved me from early death ; you forget Catherine, of evil repute."

" I forget nothing, sire," said the minister, with a look of meekness, which made Gabrielle d'Estrees wince ; " and if the Lady d'Estrees takes an interest in the subject, I see no reason why your majesty may not combine pleasure and business."

" Take an interest in the subject !" exclaimed the king, laughing, and roughly bringing on the question, like a school-boy who fears the consequence, " why, as she is probably the fair dame who will grace my crown, it can scarcely be supposed the subject is not interesting to her."

Gabrielle d'Estrees looked triumphantly at the minister.

" Sire," said the minister coldly, " that is impossible."

" Ventre St. Gris," said the ex-king of Navarre. " How impossible ? Why impossible ?"

" Rosny de Sully," whispered Gabrielle, " beware !"

" Sire," said the minister solemnly, " it is impossible. In the first place, it is quite out of the question, that under present circumstances your majesty should marry a subject. Spain is awake and alive. The son of the Marquise de Vernoil aims at supplanting you on the throne. Every mistake must be avoided by your majesty. Besides, the negotiations for the hand of Marie de' Medici, though not officially commenced, are in train—"

" How in train ?" asked the king frowning.

Gabrielle smiled. It was clear the king was on her side.

"Your majesty will please to recollect that you doubted my ability to bring about this marriage, and said you feared less to ask, than to risk a refusal."

"Yes, yes, I recollect," exclaimed the king rather uneasily.

"Your majesty, I have this morning received a private intimation, that an official demand will be met with a warm consent."

"Sire, do you allow this?" said Gabrielle, who began to be alarmed, the influence of the minister over the king being undoubted, and the quiet way in which he had acted proving his determination, and at the same time his great confidence.

"But, Rosny de Sully," exclaimed Henry the Fourth, "I have given my word."

"Sire, your majesty will pardon me. You never gave your word unconditionally. The Lady Gabrielle d'Estrees must see that the interest of the state is above all private considerations. Your majesty then, I hope, will make the formal demand for the hand of Marie de' Medici this day."

"Tut! tut! man, there is no such hurry," said the king, who now deeply regretted the presence of the fair charmer, to whose hopes he had given so much encouragement.

"Sire," exclaimed Gabrielle, "your royal word is given. I have as good as your bond. The promise made at St. Germain your majesty ratified but ten minutes since."

"Nay, *ma mie!*" said the king; "I only said you would look a queen indeed."

"Of that," interposed Sully, "no man will doubt. Did beauty and grace and elegance decide royal marriages, there can be no doubt that the Lady Gabrielle d'Estrees would carry all before her."

"And pray, most learned expounder of the royal matrimonial theory, why may not a king direct his choice where beauty, grace, and elegance lead him?" asked the monarch.

"Because, sire, a king has more duties than rights, more of policy to think of than privileges to enjoy," replied the minister.

"Sophistry!" cried Gabrielle d'Estrees, now losing her temper, and allowing her fine eyes to be suffused with tears; "this is all mere idle talk, to move his majesty to break his royal word. 'Tis treachery, rank treachery!"

"Madam, were there no treachery to his majesty in France, save in the heart of Rosny de Sully, Henry IV. might marry safely where he loved. But there is danger, and treachery, and doubt, and tribulation; and a great king must yield to state policy."

The king mused deeply, Gabrielle d'Estrees began a scene of mingled tears, supplications, threats, reproaches, and fainting, to which Sully offered only the calm reasons which, in truth, did guide the mind of one of the best and greatest politicians France has ever produced. The contest was long and alarming. The lady was alternately a terrible Juno, and a melting, yielding Danae. The king wavered, but at last, as was natural with one of his character, the woman appeared clearly about to gain the day. He could not resist the "*tears as big as little peas*" that fell from her beautiful eyes, and the minister began to fear that the day was lost. He determined to make, therefore, one last and bold stroke.

He rose.

"Your majesty," said he, bowing respectfully, "appears to have decided. You have determined to do that which I believe to be ruinous to the prospects of the country, fatal to the peace of France. I have but one duty—a solemn and unpleasant duty—and that is, to request your majesty to appoint my successor."

"You desert me, Sully," exclaimed the king in a reproachful tone.

"Sire, I cannot, loving my country, and desiring an honest fame, incur the odium of having connived at an unpopular and unwise act. I must resign, to save my honour and my reputation."

"Your majesty will find many *as* faithful and attached ministers," exclaimed Gabrielle d'Estrees, beginning to recover her hopes.

"And so, Rosny," said the king affectionately, "you have made up your mind, in this case, to leave me."

"I say it, your majesty, with deep regret; but it is my duty—"

"Then, Rosny, it must be that you are right. You would never leave me, were you not persuaded of the justness of your cause. This afternoon send the demand for the hand of Marie de' Medici. Go, my friend."

The minister bowed, without a word, and retired.

"Your majesty," exclaimed the alarmed Lady Gabrielle, who had not yet learned to understand the king's fickleness; "your majesty prefers that Rosny to your beloved Gabrielle."

"That Rosny, Gabrielle," said the king gravely, "is the guardian of my crown."

Gabrielle tried every art to persuade the king to disgrace the minister, and take one more compliant. Then it was that Henry made his historical reply to the fair dame.

"Pardi, madame! this is too much. You have been incited to this by some enemies of mine. In order, then, that you may be quite at ease on the subject, let me tell you, that I would rather lose one hundred women, as beautiful as you, than one man like Sully."

Gabrielle d'Estrees was silenced. After dinner she renewed the conflict in Sully's pavilion, but in vain.

The hand of Marie de' Medici was formally asked by the king, and Gabrielle d'Estrees returned to Paris, after begging the monarch's pardon on her bended knees.

She retired to her apartments in the Hotel Zamet, where a few days later she died, after eating a meal which had been all poisoned. It was never known, nor even suspected, by whom this poison was administered, as the object could not very well be discovered. It has even been suggested that she ate only some mushrooms which were of a poisonous tribe, and was thus accidentally killed.

King Henry IV. was a little hurt in heart at the disappointment of which the great oak had been the theatre, and visited it for several days with considerable gravity.

But soon all Fontainebleau was in activity. The marriage ceremony was settled, and Henry IV. became the husband in a few days of Marie de' Medici, who, on the 21st of September, 1601, presented him with a dauphin. The king was delighted, placed his own sword in the infant's hand, and addressed the queen thus:

"*Ma mie!*" he exclaimed; "rejoice! Heaven has granted our wish. We have a handsome son."

And he ran in such a hurry to hear a *Te Deum* in the church of the Holy Trinity, that he lost his hat in the crowd. He was as ardent a Romanist as he had, at one time, been a firm Huguenot.

Many of the plans and designs of Henry IV. were conceived and debated under that spreading oak, which is only one of the many magnificent trees that adorn that delightful forest.

One day, in the sixteenth century, St. Louis was hunting in the forest of Bieve, in the Gatinais. He lost a dog he was very fond of, and which answered to the name of Bleau. The king was very much vexed at his loss, and all the court exerted themselves to recover it. Saints as well as other beings have their flatterers. The flatterers of St. Louis hurried so swiftly about the forest, that they found the dog drinking at a spring. The spring was made into a fountain, which was called Fontainebleau.

Such is the legend which Francis I. and the Primatice have consecrated by a painting. But Mabillon tells us that it was an old domain named Breau; while Philandor and De Thou, without showing any respect for old stories, tell us that it is derived from Fontaine-belle-eau, corrupted into Fontainebleau. Here the French kings built a residence.

Old Guillaume Moriss, an ancient chronicler of France, says: "The Gatinais, diversified by woods, rivers, plains, and mountains, is very healthy and agreeable, which is the reason of its being much peopled, and of our seeing that those who inhabit it generally live to a good old age, and die full of years and in a healthy old age, not so common anywhere else in France. This induced our kings to construct a pleasure-palace in this locality. The most beautiful and royal house in Europe is Fontainebleau. Our kings not only made it a residence with a view to pleasure and health, but here were chiefly born and brought up the young princes of the crown."

Montarges and Melun had previously enjoyed the honour of being the nursery of France. The forest was peopled in the days of St. Louis by robbers. The following is related as having happened under the great oak. The king had lost his way, and was seeking his suite, when he fell into the midst of a band of robbers.

"You are the king," said the chief.

"Leave me my life, and you shall have king Louis," replied the saint.

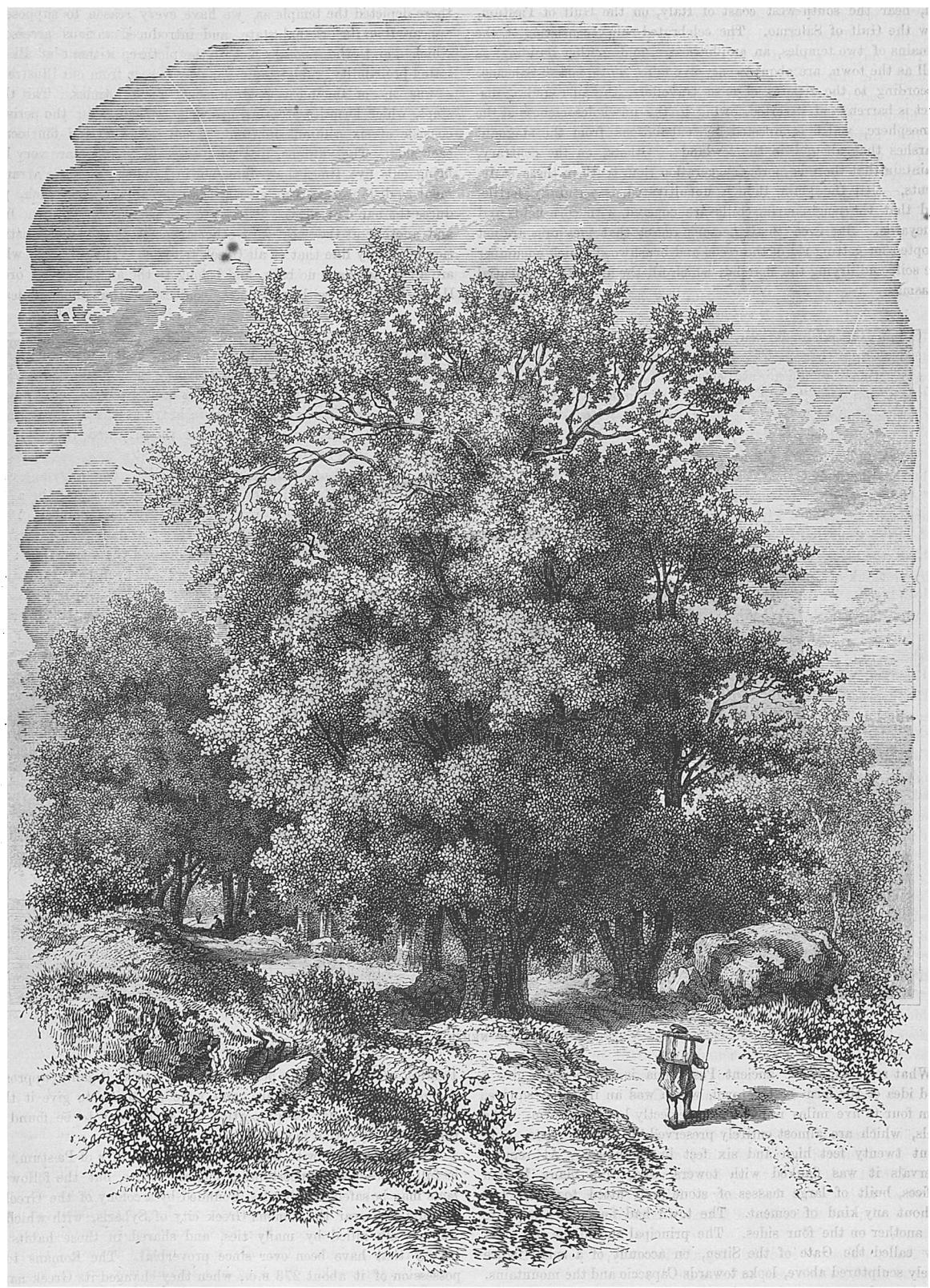
At the same time he sounded his horn, and the suite came up.

"Well, where is the king?" said the robber chief.

"I am the king, and you are an audacious brigand." As he spoke, the thieves were overpowered.

"Hunger, sire."

"Very good," said the prince; "you shall expiate your sins



THE OAK OF HENRY IV. AT FONTAINEBLEAU.

"How long have you carried on this trade?"

"Since yesterday."

"What drove you to it?"

by fighting the infidels. In future you shall eat the king's bread."

It is reported that the robbers became very good soldiers.